THE WHIPPERSNAPPER K. O. WHO COULD FIGHT

STORY of a Pomaded Warrior, Who, When the Emergency Came, Proved That All His Chatter of Battle Had the Real Courage Behind It

THIS story is told by a man once surgeon in the regular army who served for four years in the Philippines during the Spanish War and subsequent troubles and later was attached to the Philippine Scouts. For obvious reasons the author desires to remain anonymous and has concealed the names of the officers concerned. For the rest he gives a true account of a remarkable character and a great fight.

THERE we were, a company of us, tucked away in the jungle at Desmones, Province of Albay, Island of Luzon, surrounded by hills that crawled with little brown men, so frayed in the nerves that we ducked every time a stinging fly buzzed through the molten sunlight, thinking it to be a bullet.

Now I ask you, was that a time for soldiers to feel that they were commanded by a frivoling nonentity, a Bombastes Furioso in gold braid and pomaded mustaches?

Of course the lieutenants had known about it from the start, and I, as surgeon, had heard and seen enough a week after being assigned to the post. But the worst of it was that the men had heard the whispers. An officer may lack all confidence in his superior, believe him to be as hollow as a drum, and still do his duty. He has the training and the tradition of the service to back him, if nothing more. But men want to feel that they follow the orders of a captain who knows his business. And when they can't they go to battle with yellow lips and a chill in the pits of their stomachs.

And, besides, this wasn't battle. No heat of action and fury of strife for stimulant while we sulked about our wretched barracks. Corporal Dan was crossing the street with a shouted jest to a comrade on his tongue when a dum-dum whined in between the huts and his phrase ended in a gurgle. The company beat the woods about until sunset and came shambling back to stumble upon the bodies of two of their comrades in a thicket they had passed, stabbed and ripped and killed with never a cry. That takes the starch out of the rank and file, that sort of thing. And it calls for strong faith in Providence and the K. O., which latter we lacked.

Our K. O. was a volunteer. The department in its infinite wisdom may know how he came to be in charge on the borders of the Camarines, where Lukdon, the wiliest and most dangerous of robber chieftains, harried the country. To us who served under him it was one of the freak casts of evil fortune past explanation.

Captain B——'s military experience up to the time he received his commission had been gained as member of a light artillery company in Florida. Sounds well, doesn't it? Speaking of light artillery, you get a mental picture of galloping steeds, jingling harness, pounding guns and carriages, all the dash and panoply of the most picturesque arm of the service. But the Captain's light artillery had been a very different kind—sort of an exclusive little club, where popping corks supplied the circumstance of war and officers were promoted on the basis of the number of quarts they could assimilate.

Far from regarding this schooling as a matter too trivial for mention in the midst of a deadly, grim campaign, the Captain was inordinately proud of it. It gave him material for endless anecdotes. "When I was left'nant in the light ahtillery, suh," was his favorite clutch on the conversation. It came to be sickening. To see the man stand there teetering on his toes and throwing out his little pigeon breast and endlessly twisting at his perfumed mustache while he told us tales of drinking bouts, and Lukdon's men picking us off like cattle the while, was enough to make one want to start an insurrection of one's own.

His Toast to the Foe.

Well, the long and short of it was the men believed the Captain to be incompetent and cursed him sullenly, and the officers thought they knew the Captain was a fool or worse and prayed that he might get in the way of one of those whining jungle missives. Looking back on it I can see that the post was well ordered and maintained throughout, though no one could have made me acknowledge it at the time. We had our opinion of Captain B——, founded on our observation of him, and nothing he did was right. His brisk insistence upon discipline we regarded as a sham and his high respect for himself and his abilities as offensive affectation.

The first incident that might have served to enlighten us happened on a breathless hot night when four or five of us had gathered at the Captain's quarters on the second floor of a decaying shack above the messroom. We had come through no friendship for the Captain, but as a concession to monotony and a case of beer which he had managed to get through somehow. The shades to all the windows were thrown wide and we sprawled in our chairs, coats loosened and collars off, gasping for the breeze that never came. The beer was warm and flat, everything was sticky and humid and our tempers were raw edged. So we sipped and grunted and eyed each other suspiciously and suffered as we had learned to suffer in the steaming jungle.

The Captain alone remained chipper and satisfied. He had the floor to himself and he went bubbling along in his usual way during moments of relaxation. We were not very attentive. I am afraid we yawned at him. When he rose by the table, glass in hand, under the swinging lamp and proposed a toast, we glowered unresponsive.

"Gentlemen," he began, "when I was left'nant in the light ahtillery"——

Our groans, if not audible, were heartfelt.

"It used to be the custom to drink to the enemy. In those days the enemy was—uh—rather a joke, time honahed joke. But, suhs, though he is suhtainly no joke at present"——

Zing-g! Something hummed through the window. There was the sharp crack and tinkle of broken glass, and way off on the hillside the sharp report of a rifle. We heard the nervous challenging of the guards below. The Captain was still standing there with his hand upraised. Little rivulets of beer were trickling down his sleeve and dripping from his elbow. The bullet had sliced the top off his glass, leaving the base and an inch or two of rim in his grasp. We stared at him. He was smiling a little as he twisted his mustache daintily with his left hand.

"——and though he apparently has no mind to be so favored, I must insist upon the ceremony. Suhs, the enemy, a brave and worthy one, we must admit."

He finished as evenly as he had begun and without shifting from his position he swallowed the few drops the bullet had left him.

I don't know whether any of us gave the word or not, but I do know that we all sprang to our feet and drank with him. It was only later, when we broke up for the night, that we began to cast around for an adjustment of what we had witnessed.

"Damned little coxcomb," grumbled Lieutenant F—— to me as we crossed the street. "Just some more of his infernal posing."

"Yes," I agreed, "but it was pretty nervy, don't you think?"

"Nervy nothing!" snorted F——. "The thing had happened, hadn't it? And he wasn't hurt. No, he just saw a chance to show what an all-fired ironside he was, and he played up to it."

"On Wheels."

Such was the opinion of the company when the matter was noised around. The time had passed when the men's conception of the Captain's character could be altered by such trifles. It was agreed that he had done the thing for effect.

"Tryin' to make out he's a reg'ler son of a gun on wheels," said Davis, the lanky private from Tombstone. And the phrase went the rounds.

Another occurrence not long after confirmed the impression and gave us many opportunities for further scorn and mockery of our commander. The wet season was upon us and for all our preparation we began to run out of dry wood. It rained ceaselessly and we lived in a constant bath. The condition was serious. We could do no cooking, and that meant cold food and bad water, with fevers and dysentery at the end.

The Captain had sent a requisition for stove wood to the adjutant of a post four miles distant. The wood was overdue and the Captain was in a fret about it all day. About midnight he broke out with a roar and dashed into the clerk's quarters where the telephone was. A line had been installed to the post in question and he rang the bell furiously. The clerk's quarters, it should be said, consisted of a cubbyhole in the barracks and the clatter of the bell woke the whole company out of its beauty sleep. This was what they heard at the telephone:—

"Hel-lo, hel-lo, hel-lo, hel-lo. Get the adjutant. Yes, the adjutant. Captain B——."

"That you, Adjutant? Now, suh, where in hell is my stove wood? Hey?"

"Coming? Damn it all, suh, it's been coming these fo'ty hours. I want it, you hear me, suh?"

"What's that? Don't like?—Damn it all, suh, what's that to me?"

"Suh? I have the honah to ask you to repeat that, suh."

"Back to bed, I believe you said, suh?"

"Very good, suh. Now, you listen to me. Owing to our position I am unable to proceed in due form. We will waive the ceremonies, suh. At six o'clock precisely you will mount your horse. I will do the same. Service rifles, suh. We will ride to'd each othah on the road and begin firing at sight. That should be satisfactory, suh. Do you agree, suh?"

"Hello, hello! Damn the man, he's gone."

The wood arrived before dawn the following morning, but we gave the Captain none of the credit for its appearance. We were too busy commenting upon his pompous absurdity.

Lukdon, the guerilla, had been doing about as he pleased in the province of North Camarines and along the border of Albay. He profited about this time by a strange error of the authorities. Proclamation was made that $15 would be paid for every gun surrendered by a native. The idea was that the insurrectionists would be unable to resist so good a bargain and would be willing to lay down their arms for the price named. All that Lukdon did was to turn in to the United States officials a choice lot of ancient muskets and worthless rifles, a picturesque lot of old junk. He received the money and promptly used it through secret agents to purchase a shipment of Remingtons. The net result was to strengthen him enormously.

There came a native to our camp one day who demanded to be led before the commander. He informed the Captain that he was an emissary from Lukdon. From his story it appeared that the bandit chief was tired of resistance and had it in mind to surrender. Desiring to open negotiations he had sent to our K. O. He would wait up in the hills, he said, and yield himself to any force led in person by the Captain. Questioned as to why Lukdon should have picked out a post in Albay wherewith to make his peace, the messenger answered that Lukdon had fought so often with the troops in North Camarines that he thought it fitting to seek a leader who had never opposed him in battle.

The Principles of War.

This was all very well, but most unlikely. As a dodge it was not worthy of the sly insurgent and I think that that thought was uppermost in the Captain's mind as he fumed over the message.

"Damn it all, suh," he said, "can't these rascals construct a better yahn?"

However, he announced that night, to our great astonishment, that we would march the next day with fifteen men. Lieutenant F—— undertook to remonstrate with him, diplomatically.

"It's a trap, Captain," he said.

"Of co'se it is," bellowed the K. O. "Don't I know it's a trap? Do you think I don't know the principles of wah, suh? Why, when I was a left'nant in the light ahtillery we discussed all these matters. The' was a problem expounded:—What should be done if the enemy took to firing Lyddite shells. And the answer was, suh, to beat him at his own game and use fo'ty rod whiskey. Beat him at his own game, suh. Lukdon will think we're fooled, and so we will be until he tries to spring the trap. Then he'll know he'c caught a Tahtah, suh; a Tahtah."

Well, perhaps that didn't send Lieutenant F—— away with a flea in his ear. He threw up both hands. According to him the Captain was bent upon the destruction of the command. Led on by his conceit and vanity, this graduate of the light artillery thought that fighting a Filipino chieftain was as easy as letting the sizzle out of a champagne bottle. Lieutenant F—— was convinced that the end had come, and the other officers were in little better state. It really seemed as if the banquet soldier with his ruffings and posings was about to make a grave mistake.

"Gentlemen," He Began, "When I Was Left'nant in the Light Artillery"—

When the word went out to the men, however, it aroused very different emotions. The K. O. had never come so near to being popular as he was that night. The inaction, the snipping from ambush, the damp weeks of indoors, had brought their spirits to a low ebb. Now, with the prospect of an expedition and real service, they forgot their troubles in a whoop of delight. All wanted to go, even my sick in the hospital.

"I'll forgive that little rooster anything if he ranges me up near the devil who got Dan," said Private Davis.

There was bitterness and disappointment next morning when the Captain made up his party. He picked fifteen men from the ranks, Davis among them, with Lieutenant F—— and myself. F—— smiled sourly when he noted this arrangement.

We set out in a spell of terrific heat. The sun was out upon a world that dripped and oozed and the humidity was almost unbearable. We were badly shaken about noon when one of the men went crazy. I took him into the ambulance and kept him quiet by humoring him in his vagaries. It was not a cheerful task.

Before dusk we came to Bayan, a small village in the Camarines, strongly garrisoned by a detachment of veteran troops. We marched in under a pall of smoke to find half the town burnt to the ground and the commissary building still in flames. This was the work of the pacific Lukdon, whose submission we were to have received. He had made a vicious attack that morning and had been driven off after three charges upon the old stone fort, stout relic of the Spanish days, where the Stars and Stripes now floated.

The commanding officer met us at the entrance of the fort. "Well, Captain," he hailed; "what's up?"

Our K. O. smiled around at the scene of war and twisted his mustache. "Why, suh, just a little exploring expedition. We'll push right on, I guess, after a bite and rest."

We passed an endurable evening with the officers, though Captain B—— perpetrated several of his worst "light ahtillery" stories before going into mysterious conference with the commander of the post. We started again at two o'clock in the morning, leaving the ambulance behind. The messenger was still our guide, and we followed him out into a black chaos of pelting rain and slippery mud. The season had closed up on us again, and to make up for time lost the downpour was a solid sheet.

In the Jungle.

Rough going we found it, and worse as we proceeded. The trail led off through weary miles of rice fields toward the mountains. The fields, of course, were all under water, and we marched in single file along the dikes, keeping the uncertain path, scarcely more than a foot wide, as best we might. Each man could just make out the blurred bulk of the man ahead of him. At every step you felt the slimy soil sliding away under one foot and recovered only to plunge heavily to the dike as the other slipped from the path. Walking the slack wire had nothing on this.

We were thoroughly soaked and mired soon after starting, but after each one of us had fallen a few dozen times and rid himself of the expletives that came handiest we lapsed into dogged silence. Once I heard the man behind me inquiring softly of the night why, why he had left his happy, happy home. No answer forthcoming, he amused himself by falling off the dike three times in as many minutes.

At daybreak we were up to the foothills—and a sorry lot as we looked each other over, caked with mud and down at the mouth! The Captain was fussing around about his uniform. He had taken a header off the dike on his chest and he was a sight for gods and men. The strain was beginning to tell on Lieutenant F——.

"Will you hear to the man?" he rasped in my ear. "And we're all within half a day of judgment!"

We sat in a circle on the mud and ate a meal of bacon and hardtack, enlivened by one can of tomatoes some one had brought along. Nobody had much to say. We had all begged so hard to be taken along that we couldn't very well make our moan about it. Of course, now that we wanted to be cool, the rain stopped and the sun came blazing out.

As we toiled up into the foothills we could see the path we followed winding up and up ahead of us over the green and golden slopes. The place where we were scheduled to meet our old chum Lukdon lay on a plateau some miles away, just under the frowning heights of the craggy range, according to the guide. We gave little thought to what might be in store for us there. Just as the misery of the dikes had worn us to stupid silence, so now it seemed that we had always been laboring up an ascent, drenched and wheezing, under the burning brass bowl of the skies, and that we must go on and on in dumb distress forever.

Topping a rise we sighted the slender bamboo frame of a watch tower on another hill, across the valley. It was swarming with little red objects which looked like ants, but which we needed no instructor to identify as Filipino insurgents in their bright scarlet coats. The Captain immediately detached Sergeant Hays with ten men and ordered him to clear out the nest and destroy the watch tower.

This manoeuvre, which was without meaning to me, bereft Lieutenant F—— of speech. He dropped to the path and sat there wagging his head sadly and turning a wild eye once and again upon the Captain. If ever a West Pointer was hard put to it to suppress the surgings of revolt F—— was that one.

Over on the opposite rise, as yellow as a wheat field in the sunlight, we watched the thin line of our men deploying and hurrying up the slope, the blue of their shirts showing sharp against the hill. Above them the red coated insurgents bustled about, the crack, crack of the Remingtons giving snappy welcome. Hays brought his squad up quietly through the grass and then advanced in skirmishing order, firing rapidly. The natives stood their ground for a few volleys and then fell back beyond the crest. After destroying the tower the sergeant brought his men back, reporting no injuries.

Late in the afternoon we approached the plateau where, we were told, Lukdon would surrender to us. The men had worn out all their enthusiasm, and the apparent hopelessness of the situation had begun to weigh upon them. The Captain's action against the watch tower had been on the offensive and they were now far into the enemy's country. It was growled back and forth that fifteen men might be enough to take a surrendered chieftain but were certainly not enough to confront the guerilla's force in pitched battle. It was a moment when the K. O.'s unpopularity cropped to the surface. Under a favorite leader no soldier ever thinks of consequences. He will follow on through hell fire. But under one that is disliked each private believes himself privileged to doubt and criticise.

Shows His Mettle.

The path was now difficult and rocky under foot, twisting between impenetrable walls of foliage that made it impossible to throw out scouts. Hays and two others marched ahead. After them straggled our little column, myself and the Captain at the rear. He was in a stew again about something and kept crisping his mustache and halting to scan the valley below us and the opposite line of hills with his glass.

We ran into it when we came out upon the jungled level of the plateau. The first warning I had was a sharp cry from the messenger as he leaped from my side and threw himself into the bushes. The Captain whipped out an oath and his revolver and took a shot at him, shouting an order to close up and kneel. Then from the thicket to the left of the trail burst the crashing roll of a volley, with thin spurts of blue smoke, and Bedlam broke loose.

The quick word to kneel probably saved our command from annihilation, the Filipinos, as usual, aiming high. Crouching in the path, our men answered the fire, pumping at random into the thicket, whence the enemy maintained the attack with fiendish yells and continued shooting. Some one said "Jim's hit!"

In a daze I crawled to the fallen man. A dum-dum had torn away half of his neck. As I worked at the red, ragged wound, looking into the still, spattered face, with powder fumes pinching my nostrils, savage yelling, barking reports and the whine of bullets in my ear, I could hear the clear, even voice of the Captain intoning orders. It gave me a queer sort of comfort, and the mist cleared from my vision as I unwound my bandages.

We were heavily outnumbered. So much was clear from the deafening rip and rattle of rifles from up and down the thicket. But under the Captain's commands we took cover at the right of the path and our men began carefully placing their shots wherever the waving of fronds or drifting wisps of smoke betokened an enemy.

They began to find us. The spit spatter of lead through the foliage was like the quickening of an April shower. Flashes of red and scowling brown faces behind gleaming rifle barrels showed from the copse and the yells rose shriller. As I trundled to another wounded man I passed the Lieutenant, curled behind a bush. He had snatched up the fallen rifle and was pumping it deliberately like any private. The Captain was at the end of the line. At intervals his voice dominated the din, urging slow aim and low.

Suddenly I saw him spring to his feet and with an unintelligible yell dart off down the path through the sleet of bullets. A snarling cry, half curse, half sob, broke from F—— and his rifle swung around to cover the fugitive. I caught his arm before he could fire and he struggled with passion drawn face. Still I held him back, unable to believe what he, in his obsession, was sure of, that the Captain was committing the most loathsome fault. The men had seen, and they, too, cursed him, cowering closer in despair.

Then, from down the path, came a whooping cheer, followed by the smashing discharge of a heavy volley. The Filipino yells answered with a new note. We all stood up, unmindful of our danger, and peered down the path. We were just in time to see the Captain, waving his sword, leap into the thicket toward the enemy and at his heels a long line of blue shirted men.

"By God, it's the boys from Bayan!" shouted Davis. "Come on!"

And our little squad led its bewildered lieutenant in a mad, reckless charge against the hidden enemy before us.

It was a great fight. The reinforcements, secretly arranged for by the Captain, had hurried up the valley to be on hand when the trap should be sprung on us. The natives had no warning of this supplementary force, owing to the destruction of their watch tower and the cutting of their line of information by the K. O.'s clever tactics. They outnumbered us now by no more than four to one, a very fair proportion, and what with the surprise and the yelping enthusiasm of our charge we drove them.

We of the Captain's company had one good view of him before the rout as he headed the Bayan contingent to close quarters. In his left hand he brandished the splintered shard of his sword. He had thrown away his useless revolver and in his right he swung a clubbed rifle, twirling it like a blackthorn. He was hatless, torn and streaked with mud and blood. The passage of the thicket had ripped his uniform to shreds. One cheek was open from temple to chin. His voice had hoarsened to a raven croak. And so, a raging, thirsting demon, he fell upon the enemy and crushed the nearest rebel to the ground as the rifles whiffed in his face.

In five minutes the thing was over. The Filipinos, shedding gaudy coats, guns and ammunition, plunged into the jungle, where we could not hope to pursue, leaving a heavy loss behind them. The first thing I remember after the hurly-burly of the final struggle was Lieutenant F——, speechless with shame and pride—shame of himself and pride of the other—wringing the K. O.'s hand while the adoring squad looked on.

"Pretty good, suh, what?" gasped the Captain, reaching a hand for his scorched and bedraggled mustache. "Now, when I was a left'nant in the light ahtillery, suh—we learned the value—of a flank movement—always flank, suh—when you can."

And I heard Private Davis murmur reverently:—

"Who said he wasn't? Who said he wasn't a little son of a gun on wheels?"

We didn't capture Lukdon, but we cut up his force badly and he was captured some time later and imprisoned for life.

REGISTERING THEIR DEBTS

A REGISTERED letter is mighty effective bait. The Seventy-eighth street woman nibbled at the first throw.

"Of course, it is for me," she said. "That is my name and that was my address before I moved here."

"Yes, that part of it is all right," the postman admitted, "but it says 'Esq.' You're not esquire."

"No," sighed the woman, "but I am sure"——

"Of course you are sure," he put in, "but I cannot leave the letter. This is a registered letter, and we have to be very careful of registered mail. The best I can do is to give you the name and address of the writer; then you can make inquiry and ask to have the letter addressed properly."

The woman eyed the prosperous looking missive yearningly, but since the compromise offered was the best bargain obtainable she accepted it. The situation was puzzling. The name of her benefactor was totally unknown. Fortunately he was situated in a downtown office building, so immediately after luncheon she attempted to elucidate the mystery of the registered letter. Once inside the office she recognized her correspondent as the manager of a concern to which she had owed $2 for typewriting supplies for the last six months. She mentioned the letter; the man produced a bill.

"It was a copy of this," he said. "You had moved—we could not find you—mere oversight on our part, of course—still, in order to keep our accounts square—you understand"——

The woman was so mad she wasn't sure whether she understood or not, but she paid the bill. When she had gone the manager treated himself to a fresh cigar.

"Registered letters," he said, "are the best detectives going when the person you are after moves frequently and is guilty of no greater crime than shirking a little bill. An ordinary letter, even though forwarded to the proper address, may elicit no reply, but very few can withstand the appeal of a registered letter. To bring results it must, of course, be improperly directed, so that the addressee cannot receive it. In that case it either arouses sufficient curiosity to bring the delinquent down here to investigate or is returned with the proper address marked on the envelope. In either event we get on the track of the debtor and are pretty sure to collect the money."